



VANESSA-MAE

A Conversation with the 'Red Hot' Violinist.

Seventeen year old Londoner Vanessa-Mae is a young woman who knows how to command attention onstage. She takes delight in mesmerizing audiences with the power of music while seducing with the undeniable magic of her charismatic personality.

In performance, one is struck by the electricity she creates.

As a techno-acoustic rock performer, Vanessa-Mae dresses to kill, but it's her killer violin mastery that ultimately leaves listeners in awe.

It would seem that the source of Vanessa's magic is her ability to focus on the moment.

Whether connecting with an audience, perfecting a difficult musical passage by Paganini or attending to the business of an international music career, her attention is *there*.

Vanessa is currently blazing a trail in dual music careers as a guest violin soloist in symphony orchestras world-wide and as the leader of her own classical-rock band.

Her newest album *The Violin Player* is available on Angel Records.

Did your personality always suit the violin?

I've always felt that the violin is the instrument most similar to a voice. It's got that incredible soaring ability. It makes you want to sing, want to dance, want to cry. It's got all those incredible emotions. And when you're a kid, you think about the sound and tone color of an instrument, but also what it looks like, physically. The violin is so attractive, the shape of it is like a human body. For a little kid it was like my version of a pet, a doll. It was cuddly, such an affectionate feeling. Soon, I got so much into the violin that I decided to make the violin a profession.

When I was 8, I said to my mother and father that "I wanted to make it my life." They told me there are responsibilities that come with such a career. I guess with any career you need discipline, but

with something like this where you're in the public eye, it helps a lot to have discipline. So it just comes naturally. Some people take to the instrument faster than others, and for me I've always found it a comfortable, natural, and easy instrument.

It's been said that the instrument wants you to be its master."

Yeah. I've always felt that... although I've always felt that it's part of me, too. I've never quite felt that I'm its master. I've always felt that we're partners in the music business. Especially like comparing it to a voice, like another part of you like your voice.

Do you remember how old you were when you performed your first recital, in front of a real audience?

At the age of 9. That's when I went off to do a series of master's' classes in Germany. The best people are picked to do concerts and recitals in front of a few audiences of a few hundred people. I remember those when I was about 9 or 10, going to Germany and being picked. It was quite a problem because I think most were picked out once or twice, but in that project I was picked out about three or four times. That's really the first time that I was in front of a real audience, and then when I was 10, that was my first engagement with the Philharmonic orchestra.

Was that too much work for you?

No. I've always maintained that when I go somewhere, I'm prepared to work. You know, when you go to master's' classes, you don't expect to have fun apart from the music. It's really to work, so it was great. It was a nice feeling because I normally only have private classes. I went two years just for the fun of it. When you're working towards a goal, it's always nice to see that goal in front of you.

I would imagine that there were probably more boys than girls in violin classes. What was it like being a very young Asian girl, in England, among mostly older boys?

Well, as a very young girl, I went to an all-girl school. And I always had private lessons. But I remember I went to the World College of Music when I was about 11 for a few months, once I turned professional. It was really good for preparing me for the concert platform. Then I went to the senior college where people go when they're about 18 years old, but I was 11. All my classmates were 18 years old. Even if they were boys, I didn't see them as boys. They were like big brothers. Same with the girls: big sisters.

It doesn't sound like it affected you negatively, to stand out in that way.

No, because the school that I went to -- I'm half Thai, half Chinese. My second father is English; so I've lived in London since I was three years old; basically I've grown up in a cosmopolitan city in my professional life. There were mixed races in school, but I never got any feeling of, "*Jeez, she's Oriental.*" Even at the World College of Music, sure, here's this 11-year-old, where everyone else is 17, but I was lucky that, when we were fooling around, sure I was a kid to them, but when we were in lessons, we were all the same.

Can you tell me about the decision to pursue your current musical direction into rock?

It was developing within me for years. As a kid, I was trained in the classical background. It's true, but I listened to so many different kinds of music that it was natural that, as a professional, I want to experiment more. I had done three classical recordings by the time I was 13, including Tchaikovsky and a Beethoven concerto. But after that I wanted to do a much more pop, contemporary-style album; so the Violin Techno-Acoustic Fusion Concept, as I call it, came about. It's basically what I call "alternative violin music." But it's nothing more complicated than all the kinds of musical styles that I've already loved throughout my life.

I was a little surprised that you only had compositional credit on the piece "Red Hot." Are you a composer in your own right?

Sure. All the violin parts of the other stuff I did. For some of the originals like "Wide Screen" and "Jazz Will Eat Itself," Mike Batt was the composer of the theme and then we see what's best for the violin, what only a violinist would know. "Red Hot" was my original.

Your decision to record "Tocatta and Fugue" and "Classical Gas" -- were those particular favorites of yours?

Yes. I really like those tunes. "Tocatta" I always thought would work with this concept, because Bach's music is very polyphonic, meaning it has different voices and it works really good in a multitracking studio, where every instrument and every line is a different track. So that I always felt works really well, especially with the freedom to do the electric and the acoustic violin. "Classical

Gas" was a hit in 1968, and I just felt that it was a really nice track. It had a really good feeling about it. So I wanted to do it on the violin. It's a great hit in the concert, too.

Is there a difference between your favorite songs to listen to and the songs that are your favorite ones to play?

Absolutely. I've always said that what I like I want to play, but for me as a violinist, some pieces work better than others. Things like Michael Jackson's "Black or White" is a dance number, and it's for voice, but I did it in my concert show with my dancers. That is very much more of a dance number that I play along as well as dance to. But "Classical Gas" is much more instrumental and virtuosic. So I'm aware of that difference and that division between music that is great to listen to in spare time but might not work so well on violin.

Could you share some of your favorite composers, either classical or more popular?

Well, Paganini was a great violinist and influenced me greatly. Other people like Tchaikovsky and Beethoven, whom I really love. I recorded them at the age of 12 on my third album and another I just played in the middle of my rock'n'roll tour in the summer. My band took a few days' break because I had a few classical concerts that I had promised to do before. In the pop scene, I like Eric Clapton, Santana's stuff, a lot of Latin-American stuff too. And then a few dance numbers, not necessarily the artist but that particular track or song. Michael Jackson, definitely.

Do you ever play gypsy violin?

In my concert I play gypsy music. I went to Hungary in about May to play my two numbers, the singles, "Red Hot" and "Tocatta and Fugue." The Hungarians just expected me to play along with them and improvise. So I was really off the deep end in Hungary, where world-renowned gypsy violinists live. We did a gypsy tune together, and then when I got back home and did my own tour, I dropped in the gypsy piece.

In the music you're performing now, you express yourself in such an animated way, in a very sensual way.

Right.

What was it like performing classical?

I guess just whatever comes naturally to the music you're playing. As I said, I alternate between classical, pop, and I ended up in a rock festival just before I came to America. It was outside Zurich with Elton John, Rod Stewart, and R.E.M. It was the best of all worlds. And I found it very rewarding to return to the classical stuff after being on a rock 'n' roll tour. And the rock festival in Zurich was very rewarding and refreshing, but every time I returned to something, I returned with a new approach and interpretation and brought myself to new heights.

So you didn't necessarily feel stifled or conservative playing classical music.

No, not at all.

What kind of violins do you play?

The electric is a Zeta, made in the U.S.A. I got it when I was 14 years old; so I've had it for about 2 years. My acoustic violin was made in 1761. There are about 300 in the whole world, and I got it when I was about 10 years old. That was my first full-sized violin.

Do you bring the 200 year old violin with you on tour?

I haven't brought it with me on this trip. It was stolen from my house in January of this year. Thieves broke into my house just a few days before I really needed it. I didn't have it for about three months. Then I had a concert date at Buckingham Palace for Prince Edward, and the police actually managed to track down the violin just in time for that. More recently, I was talking to one of my roadies at the edge of the stage in soundcheck in rehearsal, and I took a step back and fell off the stage. And my violin was in pieces. It's been in repair for about six weeks now. I've been told that the value won't go down; neither will the sound quality. I wasn't about to part with the instrument, but it was truly in pieces.

How do the two different violins feel to play?

Physically, the electric is a lot heavier because it's made of solid wood and also there's no inner reverberation with the electric. It's solid, unlike an acoustic; so there's no help from the instrument. Acoustically there's no personality in the instrument. All the nuances and feelings and effects have to come from the player with an electric violin, and because it's amplified, you can't bluff your way through. You can hear every scratch, every detail, every out of tune note; so you've got to be more accurate with the electric violin.

You must have a little more of an emotional attachment to the acoustic violin.

Sure. It's got a personality. I mean, it's been around hundreds of years before I was around. It's really developed a characteristic.

It must be possible to feel a sense of the other musicians who came before you.

Yes, although when you buy an instrument like that at an auction, you're not allowed to know who owned it previously. But you do feel the instrument and another person.

Do you intend to pursue your two musical paths at the same time?

Sure, absolutely. My audience ranges from the pop public to the classical public; from the young to the older teenagers my age, who enjoy Michael Jackson just as well as Shostakovich and Paganini. I've always felt that good music, if it is well played, will touch anyone anywhere.

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